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Research Monograph # 12

Boys' Underachievement: Which Boys Are We Talking About?

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Which boys require help becoming literate and what kinds of help can educators provide?

Policy and research-based literature identifies boys' underachievement, and specifically their engagement with literacy, as both a Canadian and an international problem.[1] In Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, boys do not perform as well as girls on the reading comprehension and writing components of literacy tests.[2] However, the Program for International Assessment (PISA) 2000 report on reading performance explicitly states that "students from less favourable socio-economic backgrounds are on average less engaged in reading" (p. 8). Not all boys are underachieving, nor are all girls out-performing boys; educators and policy makers need to address the question of which boys require help becoming literate and what kinds of help educators can provide.

This conclusion is supported by significant research conducted in the Australian context, which argues for a "which boys/which girls" approach to gender reform in schools.[3] In addition, Froese-Germain[4] challenges simplistic notions that schools are failing boys; he argues the need to temper the rhetoric with research-based knowledge that considers which boys aren't doing well. What is required, he claims, is an understanding about the context of the "boy crisis," in which all boys are assumed to be experiencing problems or underperforming in school.

The problem is that boys are often presented as an undifferentiated group, on the basis of simply being boys. This has resulted in interventions designed to cater to perceived common interests and learning styles, such as the introduction of the boy-friendly curriculum and of more male teachers. Men, for example, are considered to be in tune with "what makes boys tick" and, hence, better able to cater to their educational and social needs.[5] As Ilrozo[6] points out, "To propose broader gender specific recommendations for reading literacy improvement is to risk another form of sexual stereotyping" (p. 18). My aim is to provide research-based knowledge about addressing boys' underachievement and to question these taken-for-granted approaches or interventions.

Research Tells Us

- Not all boys are underachieving or at risk.
- Socio-economic status, geographical location and poverty affect the educational performance and participation of specific groups of both boys and girls.
- A "which boys/which girls" approach can help educators determine the most productive kinds of intervention for struggling readers and at-risk students.

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Reviewing the Literature

Rowan et al.[7] contend that the "dramatic and alarmist terms" often used to discuss boys' underachievement have hindered meaningful reform for both boys and girls. Collins et al.[8] note that, while average test scores for boys are lower than those for girls on some measures of literacy performance, this has not translated into better labour market outcomes for girls (p. 7). A Toronto District School Board study finds that students who speak Spanish, Portuguese or Somali are at a higher risk than any other group of students of failing the Grade 10 literacy test.[9] Further, students from the Caribbean, Central or South America and eastern Africa have significantly higher dropout rates than the rest of the population. This highlights the need to address which groups of students are most at risk, as a basis for investigating factors that do not relate solely to the question of gender. The extent to which aboriginality, socio-economic status, geographical location and poverty affect the educational performance and participation of specific groups of both boys and girls must be taken into consideration. Despite the risk of adverse labelling and stigmatization, data should be separated along these lines when examining literacy performance, in order to better address the needs of specific groups.

This is not to suggest that gendered patterns related to subject choice, educational achievement and school completion needn't be considered or addressed. For example, the emerging profile of school dropouts in Toronto is of teenage boys living in economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods.[10] An Australian study[11] draws attention to the significance of gender and states that: "regardless of the social and economic resources available to [students] through their families, gender remained a significant predictor of success on these tests." The study further claims, "At each socio-economic ranking, boys scored less well than their sisters who shared their level of social and economic privilege" (pp. 253–254). This gendered pattern requires a knowledge and understanding of the social construction of masculinity.[12] This means challenging social expectations about what it means to be male and understanding how these expectations impact on boys' participation in schooling.

Getting boys to think about being boys involves ...

- developing a critical literacy approach that encourages boys to question taken-for-granted or common-sense notions of what it means to be a boy
- using texts in the language arts classroom to raise questions about the effects of stereotypes of masculinity on both boys' and girls' lives
- having an understanding of the social construction of gender to address the links between homophobia, sexism and the "policing" of masculinity

Boys' Learning Styles and the Boy-Friendly Curriculum

The ways in which boys engage with literacy are often determined by how they learn to relate to others and understand themselves. This, in turn, is influenced by questions of culture and identity, which cannot be reduced to biological sex differences.[13] For instance, it has been argued that boys' fine motor skills are not as developed as those of girls in the early years; for some, this explains why boys tend to have more difficulty mastering the "biomechanics" of learning to read and write, such as holding a pencil and turning a page. However, Alloway[14] et al. claim:

> There is no attempt to explain why biomechanics of pencil grip might be underdeveloped, and yet the fine motor skills required for electronic game playing so well-developed. Just as ball throwing and other gross motor skills are sometimes underdeveloped in girls through lack of practice, it may be that the fine motor skills required for early writing may be underdeveloped in boys for the same reason (p. 55).

It is often argued that English and language arts need to be masculinized to cater more to boys' active learning needs and interests.[15] What is required, some teachers claim, are more hands-on activities to engage boys with reading and writing in schools. Implicit in such approaches is the view that boys' increased activity is a natural consequence of simply being boys. Younger and Warrington's[16] research on learning styles in the UK found that approaches to boys' education, which promote support for brain-based learning initiatives and which stress the need to cater to boys' distinctive learning styles, has a "limited evidence base" (p. 75). They found "no

significant correlation between gender and preferred learning styles" (p. 77). Thus, caution is needed in assuming that all boys and all girls have different learning style preferences and different interests.

The Impact of Teachers' Gender on Boys' Success

Similarly, theories about biological sex-differences are at the basis of calls for more male teachers.[11] However, no empirical evidence exists to support the claim that male teachers, on the basis of simply being male, make a difference to boys' educational achievement. In research addressing the educational needs of boys, the students did not identify the gender of the teacher as impacting significantly on their learning in school.[12]

Rather, good pedagogy, relevant, intellectually demanding and engaging curriculum, and the capacity of the teacher to develop respectful relationships were identified as the teaching traits and capacities to which students attributed the quality of their learning experiences.[13][14][15] Research tells us that it is not the gender of the teacher, but rather pedagogical approaches and respectful relationships that are key to student achievement.

Implications: Beyond Quick-Fix Approaches to Addressing Boys' Underachievement

The problem with approaches like those discussed above is that they prescribe quick-fix solutions. The calls for more male teachers and for the boy-friendly curriculum are examples of one-size-fits-all approaches to improving boys' underachievement. Brozo[16] states that thinking about boys monolithically, "as though there is only one way to be masculine" (p. 18), is problematic and may contribute further to the problem of reinforcing stereotypical masculinity. In fact, Francis and Skelton[17] explicitly state that merely accommodating traditional masculinity in the classroom will not produce better educational or social outcomes for boys (p. 129). They refer to a study by Warrington et al.,[18] which examined strategies for raising boys' achievement, to conclude that "it is in schools where gender constructions are less accentuated that boys produce higher attainment [and] that it is strategies which work to reduce constructions of gender difference which are most effective in facilitating their achievement"[19] (p. 149).

Teachers thus have an important role to play in promoting less stereotypical conceptions of what it means to be a boy. Language arts teachers, in particular, are in an excellent position to encourage students to reflect on the limitations and restrictions imposed by these stereotypic views. Texts can be used in non-threatening ways in the classroom to engage boys in productive work that addresses the impact of masculinity in their lives. Refusing to define masculinity in opposition to femininity has the potential to impact on the questions teachers raise and on the way they approach questions of gender identity. In health education, for example, what it means to be male and how this impacts boys' social, emotional and psychological well-being – as well as their participation in schooling – could be discussed in great depth. The desire to be "tough" or to "act cool," and how this desire relates to the pressure that many boys feel to prove their masculinity, could be examined more explicitly.

Not all boys are underachieving or at risk. This realization has the potential to lead to a more productive approach to addressing equity and social justice in schools. Such an approach would be governed by a commitment to address the question of which boys and which girls are not achieving. This would lead to identifying how other factors (such as race, ethnicity, social class, and sexuality) intersect with gender to impact students' engagement with schooling. The resulting approach would emphasize identifying productive pedagogies, developing an intellectually demanding curriculum and building safe classroom learning environments. Teachers are at the centre of such educational reform, one that resists over-simplification of differences in gender and achievement.

Good pedagogy for boys and girls involves ...

- developing a research-based knowledge of gender reform strategies
- connecting curriculum and assessment practices to the everyday lives of students while maintaining a focus on developing their higher-order and analytic thinking skills
- refusing to treat all boys or all girls as a homogenous group
- creating a safe classroom learning environment in which gender, sexual, racial and ethnic diversity is acknowledged and incorporated into the curriculum

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